

Exploring Elementary English Teachers' Practical Knowledge: A Case Study of EFL Teachers in Taiwan

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Teaching English in elementary schools has been an important educational policy in Asian countries over the past several decades. This study investigates how in-service teachers in elementary schools conceptualize their practical knowledge about English teaching in Taiwan. It provides examples of experiences and practical knowledge that English teachers have developed in their own contexts. The practical knowledge of teachers was investigated using a qualitative case study. Three in-service teachers participated in this study. Data include interviews, classroom observations, teachers' reflective journals, and teaching materials. The study provides practical principles and rules of practice for elementary EFL teachers. It offers insights that policy makers need to consider in setting up a sound English teaching and learning program for elementary schools in EFL contexts.

Key words: English as a foreign language, elementary English, practical knowledge

Introduction

Over the past few decades, teaching English in elementary schools has become an important educational policy in Asian countries. Taiwan, Korea, and Japan stand out as the most prominent examples of this phenomenon. However, few studies have focused on investigating how elementary English teachers teach in these English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts. This study attempted to explore how teachers in elementary schools conceptualized their practical knowledge about English teaching in Taiwan. It aimed at providing examples of the experiences and

practical knowledge that English teachers have and develop in their own contexts.

Trends in research into teacher knowledge have shown that teachers' practical knowledge guides their practices (Carter, 1990). Teachers' practical knowledge is used to indicate "the knowledge and insights that underlie teachers' actions in practice" (Verloop, Van Driel, & Meijer, 2001, p. 446). Defined by Zanting, Verloop, and Vermunt (2001), teachers' practical knowledge is as "an amalgam of all teachers' cognitions, such as declarative and procedural knowledge, beliefs, and values, which influences their preactive, interactive, and postactive teaching activities" (p. 726). It also includes "reasons underlying teaching, considerations, arguments, personal motives, and zeal" (p. 726). As Mangubhai, Marland, Dashwood, and Son (2004) note, a fundamental premise of underpinning this line of research is that "what teachers do in classrooms is largely shaped by this practical knowledge, a premise that is well

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established and widely accepted” (p. 293). There have been a number of studies done on teachers’ practical knowledge from the perspective of mainstream educational research (e.g., Black & Halliwell, 2000; Carter, 1990; Clandinin, 1986; Elbaz, 1981; John, 2002). However, there have only been a few studies done which are relevant to teachers’ practical knowledge and personal practical knowledge in English as a Second Language (ESL) and EFL education (e.g., Golombek, 1998; Tsang, 2005). In a review of research on what language teachers think, know, believe, and do, Borg (2003) indicates that there are several issues in language teaching which have yet to be explored from the perspective of teacher cognition. To date, investigation of elementary teachers’ practical knowledge in EFL contexts are lacking given the contemporary, widely acknowledged role that practical theories play in shaping practice, learning to teach and determining the effectiveness of teachers. The scarcity of literature regarding elementary teachers’ practical knowledge in EFL was the primary motivation for this study.

In keeping up with the global trends of educational reform, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Taiwan started to initiate curricular and instructional reforms in elementary and junior high school education in 1997. The Grade 1-9 Curriculum for Elementary and Junior High Schools was implemented in 2001. In this new curriculum, English courses, embedded in language learning, were officially implemented for fifth and six graders with two periods of instruction per week. Each period is 40 minutes. Later on, in 2003, one 40-minute period of English course per week was officially implemented for third and fourth graders. Schools might have the flexibility to add one more period for English courses if they want to emphasize English learning based on their individual school development plans. According to the curriculum guidelines, the goal of English education generally focuses on developing students’ basic communicating competences, cultivating their English learning interests and habits, and introducing international culture and social customs. In dealing with the recruitment of English teachers in Taiwan, the MOE first requires the bureau of education in every county and city to hire new teachers who possess both an elementary teacher’s certificate and an English teaching qualification. The English teaching qualifications recognized are: the certificate for elementary English teachers from 1999 (the certificate was given after finishing a tailor-made program

to cope with the need of English teacher in 2001), a university minor in English related departments, a TOEFL score of 213 or other international and national tests of an equivalent level, and a certificate of a 20-credit English training program run by county or city bureaus. In addition, the MOE advises schools to encourage their in-service teachers to pursue any of the above qualifications in order to be accepted as English teachers. Thus, in accordance with the educational reform and the guidelines of the Grade 1-9 Curriculum, English instructions in elementary schools and elementary English teachers’ in-service training have been important issues for the past few years. Yet, few studies are available on teachers’ day-to-day classroom practice and their experience in learning to teach English.

Researchers of teachers’ practical knowledge argue that conventional research in teaching is based on technical rationality and ignores the practical knowledge and personal intentions of teachers (e.g., Clandinin, 1986; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Elbaz, 1983; Johnson & Golombek, 2002; Richards, 1996). They assert that researchers should observe from the practitioners’ point of view, letting teachers articulate their own interpretations of their work and world based on their own experience. Learning to teach involves the development of interactive skills which enable teachers to resolve specific teaching incidents, creating their working theories of teaching in the process (Freeman & Richards, 1996). These experiences on the part of practitioners, in effect their own experiences of learning how to teach English, can provide a valuable source for EFL elementary teachers. By uncovering the kind of knowledge that teachers hold and express through the understanding they have of their own work, teacher educators can gain insights useful for providing appropriate support for teachers’ professional development, and improving English educational reforms and policies.

Literature Review

In a review of practical knowledge, Carter (1990) states, “practical knowledge refers broadly to the knowledge teachers have of classroom situations and the practical dilemmas they face in carrying out purposeful action in these settings” (p. 299). Elbaz (1983) defines the kind of knowledge that teachers hold and use as practical

knowledge. Similarly, Fenstermacher (1994) describes teachers' practical knowledge as the knowledge of teachers, not for teachers. He argues that practical knowledge is the knowledge that teachers themselves generate as a result of their experiences as teachers and their reflections on these experiences. Drawing on this idea of practical knowledge from Fenstermacher, Meijer, Verloop, and Beijaard (1999) identify the following characteristics based on a review of studies on teachers' practical knowledge. They identify the characteristics of practical knowledge as follows: (a) It is personal; each teacher's practical knowledge is to some extent unique; (b) It is contextual: defined in and adapted to the classroom situation; (c) It is based on (reflection on) experience, indicating that it originates in, and develops through, experiences in teaching; (d) It is mainly tacit, which indicates that teachers are often not used to articulating their knowledge; (e) It guides teaching practice; and (f) It is content related, meaning that it is related to the subject that is being taught. In conclusion, the knowledge that is practically known and produced by teachers is called practical knowledge.

From the practical perspective, "teachers are not seen as narrowly scientific in their work; they are seen as thinking and acting in complex, contextual, and emotional ways" (McLean, 1999, p. 67). As Clandinin and Connelly (1988) states, teachers are individuals but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They always operate in relation to other phenomenon, always in a social context. Likewise, McLean (1999) indicates "practical researchers view the teacher and teaching as contextualized. They are concerned with the person in context, particularly the immediate working environment" (p. 68). This supports what Connelly and Clandinin (1988) speak about when they suggest that the knowledge teachers have about their classroom is their personal practical knowledge. It is a term that allows researchers to capture the idea of experience that allows us to talk about teachers as knowledgeable and knowing persons. They believe that teachers are professionals and when they make decisions about practical action, they are drawing on the totality of their knowledge, a unique blend of all sources of knowledge.

Elbaz (1981, 1983) conceptualizes teachers' practical knowledge based on a case study of an English teacher. She defines practical knowledge using four categories: the content, orientations, structure, and cognitive style. The

content of practical knowledge refers to the things that teachers know about themselves, their students, their teaching contexts, and the subject matter. The content of knowledge is acquired and reenacted through various orientations and structure. There are five orientations of practical knowledge: the situational, theoretical, personal, social, and experiential. It is the interaction of these five orientations that provides the venue for learning and that directs teachers' work. The structure of practical knowledge includes the practical principles, rules of practice, and image. Elbaz (1981) states that "the rule of practice may be followed methodically, while the principle is used reflectively, and the image guides action in an intuitive way" (pp. 49-50). The cognitive style is developed as the teacher enacts the various images of self as a teacher. Studies in the practical knowledge of teachers have generally followed Elbaz's framework (e.g., Black & Halliwell, 2000; Clandinin, 1986; Chen, 2005; Golombek, 1998; John, 2002). For example, John (2002) investigated six educators' practical professional knowledge. He relied on the ideas associated with practical and personal practical knowledge, particularly in the work of Elbaz (1983), Clandinin (1986), and Connelly and Clandinin (1988). He drew on the key concepts of images, practical principles, and rules of practices to structure the data and guide the data analysis. Data included teachers' life history conversations, interviews with each participant to elicit information related to the teacher's current teaching situation, observations, and a range of documents including all the relevant subject handbooks, numerous resources and materials relating to particular sessions. He used the notion of image to capture teacher educators' practical knowledge. Teachers' knowledge was then identified by images of subject, images of teaching and learning, images of students and images of situation. The study finds the teacher educators' knowledge to be characterized by a number of dimensions: intentionality, practicality, subject specificity, and ethicality.

More recently, Chen (2005) investigated 17 teachers using their practical knowledge to make changes in their classrooms in Singapore. The process was initiated through a practicum project for an in-service diploma in teaching. As Chen states, these teachers' practical knowledge consisted of a solid foundation in child development with a good understanding of their subject curriculum. The study finds "teachers' principles and rules revolve around respect

and responsibility and their cognitive style reflects their commitment to teaching in terms of being a model, creator of opportunities, good classroom manager, nurturer, fun-loving teacher, octopus, and facilitator” (p. 15). The above review outlines the concept of practical knowledge that acts as the conceptual framework of this study.

Method

This study used a qualitative case study methodology to investigate elementary English teachers’ practical knowledge in an EFL context. It explored the structures of practical knowledge using the key concepts of images, practical principles, and rules of practice to guide both the data collection and data analysis.

Participants

Three in-service teachers from different elementary schools in my teaching area voluntarily participated in this study. They were all qualified elementary teachers with teaching certificates and English teaching qualifications. They had all had the same years of experience teaching English in elementary schools. They all started teaching English in 2001 when English was mandated in elementary schools in Taiwan. In selecting the participants, many interpretive researchers rely on “key informants” as a primary source of data. To gather the richest possible data, I approached my informants who had participated in the in-service English teacher training programs held by my institute for two consecutive years before the study. I knew them and we were all working in the same county, which I was familiar with. These criteria were used to ensure that I would be able to investigate thoroughly in order to fully understand the contexts of my research. I chose them because I thought they might be interested in my topics and would be willing to share their teaching and learning experiences. I explained my proposal and the required participation to them.

All the participants’ names used are pseudonyms. Vicky is in her 40s. She has been teaching at her school for 16 years. She is teaching the fourth grade. She frequently attends English teacher training programs and workshops because she thinks she wants to get up-to-date knowledge

about English teaching. Joseph has been teaching at his elementary school for 13 years. He is in his 30s. He has tried to attend English training programs and workshops whenever possible for the past few years. Regina has been teaching at her school for 4 years after she obtained her master degree. She is in her 30s. She teaches grade six. During the first two years of her English teaching career, she often attended English teacher training programs and workshops. She had one year of team teaching experience with an English native speaker at her school. She gained a lot of insights from the team teacher. The three participants have been teaching at their schools since the beginning of their teaching careers.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected during the fall semester of 2005 and the spring semester of 2006. This study included data from three interviews with each participant, three observations in each participant’s classroom, five entries of the teachers’ journal writing, and classroom artifacts. Different types of data were used to seek for the triangulation in order to improve credibility and trustworthiness of the findings and confirm them (Merriam, 1989).

Three semi-structured interviews with each participant were conducted. Each lasted about two hours. At the beginning of the study, the first semi-structured interview was conducted at the researcher’s office. The questions were designed to get basic information from the teachers, including the questions about the classes they were teaching, their years of teaching, their students’ English learning levels, their schools’ requirements, and their professional development (e.g., participating in workshops, conferences, pre-service and in-service teacher training programs, action research, or community of teachers). The researcher collected the basic information from the participants and their teaching contexts and then elicited data related to the participants’ current English teaching situations, their understanding of the language teaching curriculum and approaches, and their in-service activities. The second interview was conducted when the researcher first visited the participants’ schools. It was to elicit data related to the teachers’ idea of a successful lesson, their happy memories and sad memories regarding English teaching, the limitations of the teaching materials, the teaching methods

they liked, and their role as a teacher. The third interview was arranged at the end of this study after the third observation at the participants' schools. It was basically for the teachers to talk about their reflections on that day's lesson, their weaknesses and strengths as an English teacher, their beliefs about language teaching and learning, and their experiences of participating in this study. Data were tape-recorded and then transcribed for analysis.

Before teachers participated in this study, they were told that there would be three video-taped classroom observations and that the purpose of videotaping was to help the researcher capture the teachers' teaching activities and students' learning, not to judge their instruction. The main focus of observation was for the researcher to get an understanding of the teachers' English language teaching. The video camera was set at the far back of the classroom to capture the classroom events in order not to interfere and upset the teachers and students. As the three participants came from normal teacher education programs, they were used to teacher educators' observation during their practicum. I, as the data collector, was sitting at the back of the classroom in order to take the field notes. Each observation lasted 40 minutes. The collection of observation data was done according to Glesne's (1999) observation principles with detailed descriptive field notes being taken. During the classroom observations, I used a classroom observational sheet to record the data. In the first section of the observation sheet, I described the classroom environment, the learning tasks, the activities, and the collected materials. In the second section of the observation sheet, I wrote down the time, classroom events and the teachers' teaching procedures along with the dialogues and interactions between the teachers and students. My observations focused mainly on the teachers' instructional practices. Classroom observation also served as a means for me to record the participants' non-verbal expressions such as facial expressions, hand gestures, group work locations, teaching aid preparation, and classroom atmosphere. A total of nine observation videotapes were made. All the videotaped observation data were transcribed with attention being paid to issues such as verbal and non-verbal actions for data analysis.

During the study, the teachers were also asked to write reflective journals. The journal-writing period spread across two semesters. The journal topics were adapted from

Richards (1994), including teachers' reflections on English teaching activities, their teaching stories, their students' reactions or responses to their English teaching, or their experiences of their participation in this study. After reading and rereading the data of each participant, the researcher selected journal entries that also reflected the content of teachers' practical knowledge (Elbaz, 1983) regarding the knowledge of themselves, students, teaching contexts, and the subject matter for data analysis. Thus, the selected journal entries included teachers' reflections on their ideas and strategies of English teaching activities, preparation for teaching materials, and concerns with students' learning attitudes, processes and results.

The conceptual framework of this inquiry was modeled on the concept of Elbaz's (1981, 1983) practical knowledge. Key concepts of the framework were the structure of practical knowledge, including images, practical principles, and rule of practices. For data analysis, repeated concepts, phrases, and patterns were first coded into themes for discussion (Van Manen, 1990). After the key concepts of images, practical principles, and rules of practice were determined, they were used to guide the next-step data analysis. Images served as the threads to link to the teachers' practical principles and rules of practice in order to be able to understand their English teaching practice.

Merriam (1998) suggests strategies for establishing internal validity, which include triangulation, member checks, and long-term observations. Triangulation is a process in which researchers verify their evidence by using different sources. This study included data from interviews, classroom observations, and journal writing. Member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to improve the credibility of the findings and interpretations. At the end of the study, the results of the data analysis were sent to the participants for verification. Data verification by the participants was to enhance the trustworthiness of the interpretations. Necessary changes for clarifying basic information and modifications were then made.

Findings and Discussion

Teachers' Images

As Clandinin (1986) and Elbaz (1983) indicate, the

cognitive style of practical knowledge is expressed in terms of the teachers' images. Drawing on this concept, teacher image was used to capture the participants' understanding of themselves as teachers.

Vicky: Being like a gardener. As a teacher, Vicky sees herself as a gardener and a facilitator. She used the image of a gardener to talk about the relationships with her students. She said,

The student is like a small plant. I hope to provide the plants with sunshine, water, air and an appropriate environment for them to grow, but not to force, control, and push them to grow. I just let them grow based on their potential. Thus, I think the teacher is very crucial in providing and creating the learning atmosphere and environment for students to learn. (Vicky, first interview)

By using the metaphor of "the student is like a small plant" and the phrase of "creating the learning atmosphere and environment for students to learn," Vicky talked of her role as that of a gardener, who is to help small plants to grow well. She hopes to help students to learn according to their own potential.

In addition, she believes that learning has everything to do with self-motivation. She said, "Learning is all on oneself" (Vicky, first interview). This phrase helps explain her beliefs about learning. She stated that if the students were not motivated to learn, no matter how hard the teacher was working, it would be of little help. However, if the students were motivated to learn and were willing to learn, real learning would happen. Thus, learning lies in self-motivation. She saw her role as "a facilitator guiding students to become independent learners" (Vicky, first interview). The quote "learning is all on oneself" can also be connected to her own learning as an English teacher during the past few years. She often participated in English workshops and in-service teacher training programs because she wanted to broaden her perspective as an English teacher. By participating in such programs and workshops, she could exchange experiences with peer teachers, gain insights from teachers and educators, and update her knowledge (Vicky, first interview).

Regina: Acting like a performer. Regina first talked

about her role in her job as that of a busy caretaker (Regina, first interview). She can only feel relaxed once she gets home. It is also the image of a caretaker that shows that she really cares about every student's individual learning and tries to monitor students' progress from time to time. Secondly, as an English teacher, it seems to her that being an elementary English teacher is a little bit different from other teachers. In some ways, she even feels a sense of superiority because students regard English teachers as superior to teachers of other subjects. She stated that when she started her English class or started to speak English, she became more active. Students feel that she is a cheerful teacher. She said, "That's the way English teachers should be—it's our responsibility to make learning more fun, I think" (Regina, first interview). While Regina was talking about this, she tried to express her understanding of being an elementary language teacher in an EFL context. She believes that creating an atmosphere that promotes interaction is crucial for foreign language learning and for promoting students' oral practice.

Additionally, as an English teacher, she is very aware of the responsibility for creating a language learning classroom. She tries to ease students' language learning anxiety and encourage them to talk. Therefore, when she starts speaking English, she feels like she is acting and playing a role on stage. This acting image denotes that she has to do more preparation for an English class, just as performers would rehearse before going on stage. The image of performing can also be connected to her frequent use of role-play in her teaching. Once, on a field trip, she took her students to a radio station to record a broadcasting show. She said that students valued that experience very much and all seemed to do their best during that performance. In addition, during one Christmas season, while students were practicing English songs, she thought of having them perform for other classes (Regina, third interview). In this way, the holiday atmosphere would be warmer and students would really perform for a bigger audience at school.

For Regina, the image of a performer shows the effort she puts into her teaching life. Regina's data and her personality indicate she is very concerned with each student's performance and achievement.

Joseph: Sewing like a tailor. The tailor image came

from the first and the third interviews and his journals writing. He used the following terms to talk about her role as an English teacher: "Sewing on missing patches that students should have," "filling in the gaps students have accumulated over the past three years," "weaving a world perspective for students," "giving students hope," and "giving students dreams" (Joseph, first and third interviews, second journal entries)

In reflecting on his teaching for the past few years, Joseph felt like a tailor, who kept sewing patches for his students. He always feels the needs to provide students with what they are missing in their English. They should have achieved a certain level of English before they graduate from elementary school. In the next stage, students would have to face unnecessary challenges if they were not well prepared at the present level. Thus, he feels the frustrations most when he teaches higher graders. For students who had not had a good foundation in English, he has to "sewing the patches," meaning that he has to keep patching up their English. He said,

I keep sewing on patches for the students. When teaching grade 6, this phenomenon often bothers me. When teaching high graders, my biggest frustration is that I find students have not had a good foundation and this backlog has been kept all the way through. And I have to keep reviewing the materials that students should have learned well already. (Joseph, first interview)

Sewing on patches means that the missing parts as well as the ones that students are struggling with have to be found. He, as a teacher, has to try to guide the students to sew on the patches. He tries to help the students to put all the missing parts together. In this way, he can help his students to catch up with the current level. While Joseph was talking about the above frustration in English teaching, he felt the big constraint came from the present elementary English education, which only included one to two periods of instruction per week. However, he sees a teacher as a tailor, not only to fix things, but also to help students create a beautiful future and world.

The images that the participants use lead to deeper insight into their feelings and inner conflicts (Black & Halliwell, 2000). They want to be a gardener, a guide, a helper, or a tailor, who is versatile and has some sort of

magic power to help their students' English learning. However, the guide also has the responsibility to monitor students' learning progress and achievement. Thus, studying a teacher's image gives insight into related experiences for the image becomes embodied in them as persons, expressed in their language and their actions just as Connelly and Clandinin (1988) state,

An image reaches into the past, gathering up experiential threads meaningfully connected to the present. And it reaches intentionally into the future and creates new meaningfully connected threads, as situations are experienced and new situations anticipated from the perspective of an image. (p. 60)

Exploring teachers' understanding of themselves through images helps the researcher and the teachers themselves gain access to their emotional responses and their efforts to teach English in their own contexts.

Practical Principles and Rules of Practice

The following analysis highlights the most salient features that the three participants demonstrated, expressed, and valued in their knowledge of teaching English. Following Elbaz (1983), the themes were categorized according to practical principles and examples were given of the teachers' classroom practice as their "rules of practice." Selected practical principles and rules of practice are presented in Table 1 for discussion. Since not all examples or incidents can be put into one category only, incidents and examples might overlap. All are used to support data analysis in the following discussion.

CLT orientation: Language is for communication. These teachers' practical principles lean towards Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The essence and characteristics of CLT according to Larsen-Freeman (2000) are used for the analysis and discussion in the following section. The rules of practice were from classroom observation, interviews, and teachers' reflective journals. These include (a) concept of standard English pronunciation, (b) accuracy vs. fluency issues, (c) using classroom English often, (d) using group work, (e) giving students more oral practice, (f) creating meaningful learning contexts, and (g) designing communicative activities for

Table 1

Teachers' Practical Principles and Rules of Practice

Practical principles	Rules of practice
CLT orientation: Language is for communication.	(a) Giving the concept of English pronunciation (b) Coping with accuracy vs. fluency issues (c) Using classroom English often (d) Using group work (e) Giving students more oral practice (f) Creating meaningful learning contexts (g) Designing communicative activities for students to follow
Scaffolding the students to learn	(a) Getting to know about students' potential, ability, learning styles (b) Designing learning material like flashcards, sentence structures, posters, worksheets, and real objects (c) Using group work for cooperative learning (d) Increasing new language load gradually (e) Reinforcing language structures
Creating a supportive learning environment	(a) Respecting students and giving positive comments (b) Giving students a sense of value and achievement (c) Guiding students to say and use whole sentences (d) Creating a positive competing atmosphere (e) Encouraging and supporting students to learn

students to follow. Some of the above criteria are presented below.

In Taiwan, some elementary school students do not have the correct concept of English pronunciation as they are young and as some have learned English with English native speakers at kindergartens and children's language schools. These children have their own interpretation of standard English as well as biases about pronunciation toward the non-native English teachers. Therefore, giving students the correct concept of English pronunciation and learning in an EFL context is important since language is for communication. One example of this type of issue comes from Vicky's experience. She recalled an incident that a student criticized an English teacher's pronunciation leading to the students not having a good learning attitude in class. She seized the chance and talked to her students, "The ultimate propose and goal of language is communication. The pronunciation may differ slightly due to the accents from different regions" (Vicky, second interview). She tried to communicate the concept of respecting and accepting multiple perspectives. The concept of "standard English" is a big obstacle for Chinese English teachers to overcome. As

an EFL teacher, the pronunciation is always the first issue that teachers have to cope with, especially when facing young learners.

During my observations, these three teachers usually provided communicative activities for students to do pair work or group work for oral practice. Topics included talking about food, snacks, and fruit students like (Vicky, third observation), using a survey to collect information about friends' abilities in sports (Can you play ___?), going on a school singing tour after learning a Christmas song during the holiday week (Regina, first interview), etc. These teachers tried to get their students to dare to speak. For example, Regina says she would love to see students willing to speak English. She said,

If they say something wrong, that can be OK only if they are willing to talk because they can learn from the mistakes. Having an open mind is important in learning a language. Daring to speak can promote learning a language. (Regina, second interview)

She said that she had collected a lot of rules for supporting students' English learning from her TESOL

methods training courses, among which are students to say full sentences, and giving them positive feedback. Her strategy is that “for weak students they only need to say something to be encouraged. But she would encourage stronger students to say full sentences” (Regina, second interview).

Vicky also let students talk about real life experiences as observed in her third observation. She would draw a big table with all of the students' names in the grid on the board. After teaching about foods, snacks, and grocery shopping, she asked the students to fill in the grid with information about their favorite foods. Then, she gave each student an opportunity to come to the front to tell the class about his or her choices. In this way, students all paid attention to that day's lesson and talked about their own experience. This strategy was similar to Moon's (2000) suggestions that teachers should try to create a context for the students to feel the need for using English.

During Joseph's third observation, he asked students to do a survey to report on their friends' sport abilities. He designed a survey worksheet for his students to gather information about the sports their friends liked. The students did the survey and oral practice before the class. He said that by doing this communicative activity, students got real life information and became more familiar with the sentence structures, intonation, and the learned vocabulary. Having to report the results to the class helped the students to collect real data for their oral report (Joseph, third interview).

These teachers tried to create different types of meaningful learning contexts for oral practice. These activities kept their students motivated and provided more opportunities for real-life oral practice.

Scaffolding. Scaffolding strategies for students to follow an English lesson were observed with all the three teachers. These strategies included (a) getting to know the students' potential, ability, and learning style (b) designing learning materials like flashcards, sentence structures, posters, worksheets, and real objects, (c) using groupwork for cooperative learning, (d) increasing new language load gradually, and (e) reinforcing language structures through drilling and practicing.

These teachers knew their students quite well since they all lived in small communities and they had been teaching in the same school for years. Vicky would

interview a new class one by one at the beginning of a semester to get to know each student's background and abilities. She then knew how to deal with students who need special assistance in learning subject matters and in getting along with classmates. Joseph's school was in an aboriginal area. His students came from aboriginal families. Thus, when he used chants and songs in his English classes, he would ask students to move or dance along. He said he would pay attention to the students' learning styles and he wanted his students to demonstrate their talents and potential for singing and dancing.

In helping students to practice speaking English, Vicky would think about linking English language learning to the students' life. In this way, the students better understood why it is useful and meaningful to learn English. She said, “Helping students to build confidence is important so that they can advance successfully” (Vicky, third interview). When dealing with children of varying ability, Vicky's strategy of grouping students was to group students according to their ability. This was observed during the third observation. She explained her reason afterwards in the interview and said that for the high-achievers, the group discussion and practice was easy, while for the weak students she would move around and help them to talk. Her strategy of managing mixed ability students was found to be similar to Moon's (2000). In her discussion of two Malaysian elementary teachers, who grouped students according to their abilities, gave different tasks, and paid attention to different groups at different times. In this way, students with similar abilities seemed more comfortable in working together and expressing ideas.

During Regina's third observation and third interview, a lesson on using the present continuous tense was observed for which students had to use the learned verb phrases such as surf the Internet, do homework, listen to the radio, write e-mail, etc. She wanted to use the students' prior knowledge (i.e., verb phrases to talk about activities) and expand it to the new structure. In this way, she decreased the new knowledge load (Regina, third interview) and she could guide the students to use the new sentence structures easily. At the same time, she thought she used a good strategy to lead the students to flow with her to the next step.

In preparing teaching aids to guide the students' learning, these teachers tried their best to provide comprehensible input of vocabulary items, sentence

structures, and language contexts. The use of picture cards, word cards, and real objects to teach vocabulary and drilling was impressive, which demonstrated their understanding of teaching children a foreign language. Putting the vocabulary into the sentence structures with a context poster on the board was another strategy that these teachers all demonstrated well in each observed lesson. Regina and Joseph both pointed out that these teaching strategies had led the students to get into learning routine in their English classes (Joseph, fifth journal; Regina, fourth journal and fifth journal). In addition, Joseph gave one example of his lesson flow. He said,

In my English class, I first provide and create the language context. Next, I go to introduce the new vocabulary. Then I introduce the sentence structures by using the vocabulary. Drilling and substitutions are then used. It's the practice part that I need to spend more time thinking about strategies and designing activities. (Joseph, first interview)

These above practices emphasize what Connelly and Clandinin (1988) state, "Personal practical knowledge is found in the teacher's practice" (p. 25). Managing student learning styles and adapting teaching materials to fit the students' learning needs and abilities demonstrated these teachers' level of professional development.

Creating a supportive learning environment. These teachers were very aware of how little time the students had to learn English at school and at home. Therefore, they tried to help the students to learn as much as possible during each class. Shy students lacking confidence are often seen in rural schools due to dysfunctional family structures and low economic status. Some students are from single-parent families; some live with grandparents, and some need financial aid. Therefore, these teachers try to create a supportive English learning environment for them. These strategies included (a) respecting students and giving positive comments, (b) giving students a sense of honor or achievement, (c) guiding students to respond in complete sentences, (d) creating positive and competing atmosphere, and (e) encouraging and supporting them.

Teaching children English does not necessarily require fancy ideas or materials. These beliefs could be seen with these teachers. Being clear about what you want to give to

the students is very important. These teachers guided their students to have the correct attitude towards learning through cooperation, not cruel competition, which is very important for young foreign language learners to enjoy learning. This phenomenon was clearly observed in Regina's class. Her students helped one another and therefore improved the whole class's performance and achievement. During the first observation, the students were divided into three groups and they had to put scrambled sentences together. Each group had different sets of sentences such as "I go to school by bus" and "I walked to school." The in-group learning atmosphere was harmonious and positive.

In Regina's second reflective journal writing, she reflected on her midterm test items. She had a listening part and a written part, each of which counted for 50% of the assessment. She tried to provide both easy and challenging test items to cater for all levels of students. Her rationale was to help low achievers gain a fair grade, which could give them a sense of achievement. In this way, even those students who usually did not perform well would also score about 70 to 80. She indicated, "In this way, these students would feel happy to keep learning English" (Regina, second journal writing). She did not want to see students give up at an early stage.

The fact that Joseph was approachable helped him to gain students' trust and get real responses. Joseph's students had come to know him the previous year when he was teaching them English on Wednesday afternoons as an extra curricular activity, which was funded by the local government to encourage schools to use extra curricular time to teach children English. During that time, students were impressed with his assistance in their learning. When the students made progress, he gave them a sense of achievement. Students sensed the special attention and efforts from him. In the observation of his class, the conversational atmosphere and style were noticeable probably because the students had interacted with him in a variety of formal and informal situation.

Vicky used different comments and strategies to encourage her students to speak English. If students did not have the correct answers or pronunciation, she would reply, "He/she is great because he/she just said it. Although it's not very correct, if I correct him/her, he/she learns better and more" (Vicky, third interview and third observation). She

said that her students did not have the problem of hesitating to reply to her questions. The other point she mentioned was that one hour of English learning every week was not enough for the students to learn English well. Therefore, giving students opportunities to follow the teachers' instruction and practice carefully in every class was very important. She tried hard to engage everyone in oral practice and to arouse the students' learning motivation and interest.

In conclusion, as Moon (2000) writes, many teachers she talked to believed that "the ideal situation for children learning a second language is to live in the country where the language is spoken, to be surrounded by it and to acquire it naturally through using it every day" (p. 1). Thus she suggests that an ideal learning situation would include time, exposure, a real need for English, variety of input, and meaningful input. In order to be able to create right conditions for language learning in the classroom, Moon also indicates that teachers have to (a) make the classroom a lively place through the use of wall displays, (b) motivate students to want to learn English by using interesting and enjoyable learning activities, (c) create a warm and happy atmosphere where teachers and students enjoy working together, and (d) help students to develop personal reasons for learning English such as out-of-school class activities or projects. This study found that these participants seemed to have employed strategies similar to the above conditions. These teachers' learning to teach English reflects Freeman's (1996) discussion on the concept of practice. He states that teachers organize what they know to map out what is possible through their conceptions of practice. Their conceptions also guide them in the face of new or problematic situations in their classrooms.

Conclusion and Implications

As Zanting, Verloop, Vermunt, and Van Driel (2001) state, practical knowledge is an integrated set of cognitions. This study found these teachers' practical knowledge formulated through a process of reshaping their existing knowledge of English teaching and learning from training programs and their classroom practices rather than just having language learning theories, methods, or materials imposed. Just as Richards (1996) states, when teachers talk about their teaching, they generally present a rational view

of the kind of learning environment they try to create in their classes. Examining these teachers' practical principles and rules of practice, this study found that these teachers generated their classroom knowledge as a result of their experiences as teachers and their reflections on these experiences with the students in their contexts. First, top-down theories from research and experts gave them directions in learning to teach English. Thus, they responded to the trend in TESOL methodology and attended teacher training programs and workshops to update their knowledge. Next, in order to help the student to learn English in an EFL context, they used scaffolding strategies to guide the students to learn and created supportive language-learning environments to help students to use the target language. Examples from classroom observations demonstrated their knowledge of English teaching and explained the professional decisions they made within their teaching contexts. The findings assert Elbaz's (1983) orientations of practical knowledge as situational, theoretical, personal, social, and experiential. It is the interaction of these orientations that provides the venue for teachers' learning and directs their work. Moreover, exploring teachers' understanding of their roles through images and their metaphorical meaning helps the researcher gain access to understand these teachers' emotional responses of their work. Borg (2003), in a review of research on what language teachers think, know, believe, and do, indicates that there are several issues in language teaching which have yet to be explored from the perspective of teacher cognition. The results of this study hopes to contribute to the fields of language teachers' cognition.

In addition, this study found that investigating these teachers' practical knowledge helped a teacher educator explore and understand the practitioners' working world. The examination of teachers' practical knowledge can contribute to the integration of theory and practice. As Freeman (1996) points out, the issue of how teachers acquire their understanding of classroom practice is a critical one if the teacher education program is more than simply transmitting explanations of teaching but rather supporting teachers-in-training in developing their own understanding. Enabling teachers to rename their experiences, recast their concepts and reconstruct their classroom practice is what educators in teacher education should do.

This study highlights the following lessons for practitioners, researchers, and teacher educators. First, through participating in a study with researchers, the practitioners can be guided to understand their own professional development. Second, working with inservice teachers can help researchers and teacher educators gain more insight into teachers' interpretations of their instruction. This type of collaborative partnership offers opportunities for researchers and teacher educators to investigate how teachers put theory into practice in L2 education. Third, walking into practitioners' working contexts can help researchers and teacher educators see how educational policies are working. Lastly, in order to make elementary English instruction successful in an EFL context, setting up a sound inservice teacher-training program for English teachers is necessary. Helping them to equip themselves as competent English teachers, acquire more English knowledge, and pursue professional development is indispensable.

It must be emphasized that this study highlighted the teachers' practical principles and rules of practice for elementary English teaching in an EFL context. It attempted to understand how the teachers made sense of their teaching through their classroom practice. For the purpose of this paper, the focus of the analysis was the teachers' classroom knowledge. The reactions of the students were not targeted for discussion and analysis. In order to understand the impact of teachers' practical knowledge on students' reactions and learning, further studies in investigating teachers' practical knowledge will be needed. Furthermore, as this study was to investigate the participants' practical knowledge and to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those teachers who are involved (Merriam, 1998), it was not aimed at critically evaluating the participants' teaching techniques or strategies. Therefore, it did not go further to analyze and evaluate their teaching in this paper, which might be seen as one of the limitations of this study. Future researchers who are interested in this area may wish to explore this issue further.

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